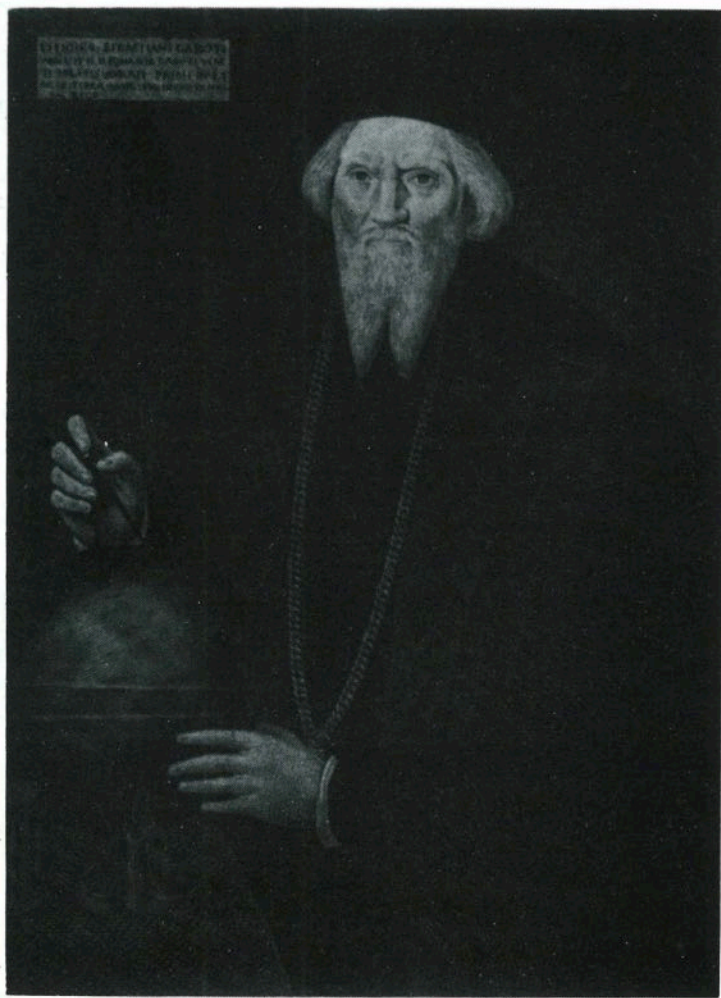


# SEBASTIAN CABOT AND BRISTOL EXPLORATION

DAVID B. QUINN

REVISED EDITION



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## LOCAL HISTORY PAMPHLETS

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This pamphlet was the twenty-first in the series and was published in 1968. The research into the early voyages of exploration in the North Atlantic and the participation of Bristol sailors in those voyages was already developing rapidly.

There is little detailed information on John Cabot but it is possible to learn something of the man and his work from this study of his son.

As the 500th Anniversary of the historic voyage approaches, it was decided to reprint this pamphlet. However, since then, more has been discovered about this subject and Professor Quinn, now Emeritus Professor at the University of Liverpool, has written a supplement which summarises what has been discovered since 1968.

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*Cover Illustration:* Engraving of Sebastian Cabot made by Rawle for Samuel Seyer's *Memoirs ... of Bristol*, 1823, II. 208 from the original portrait destroyed in 1845. The engraving is in the City Art Gallery (Photographed by F.G. Webb).

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## SEBASTIAN CABOT AND BRISTOL EXPLORATION

by DAVID B. QUINN

Sebastian Cabot spent a significant part of his life in Bristol and made an appreciable contribution to her overseas activities in the reign of Henry VII and the opening of the reign of Henry VIII. It is from his Bristol period that his first overseas experience and his interest in exploration which dominated his life sprang, and the activities of the pioneering Bristol voyagers provided inspiration for his life work in the Spanish service and for his persistence as an old man in getting the first effective English overseas exploring and trading corporation under way.

During his lifetime<sup>1</sup> Sebastian appears to have taken to his own credit some of the achievements of his father, John Cabot, and consequently later generations, especially in the Elizabethan age, assigned to him alone the major responsibility for the English voyages to America under Henry VII. Down to the present century he was credited with taking the leading part in the 1498 voyage of his father and it is only comparatively recently that the majority opinion of scholars—itself a fickle thing—has narrowed down his individual contribution to Bristol voyaging to a single venture, made in the years 1508-9.

The greater part of his adult life, from 1512 to 1548, was spent in the service of Spain: the last decade of his life in England again, though mainly in London, his Bristol connection covering the early formative years of his manhood only and extending from about 1494 to about 1510. It was revived fitfully in 1521 and for a time, after his return to England, in 1548-9. It is not known that he had continuous associations with the city throughout his career in Spain though he can be shown to have had contacts there with

1. Sebastian's life-story is well represented in published documents which, together with much commentary, appear in Henry Harrisse, *Jean et Sébastien Cabot* (1882) and *John Cabot, the discoverer of North America, and Sebastian Cabot his son* (1896); J. A. Williamson, *The voyages of the Cabots and the English discovery of North America under Henry VII and Henry VIII* (1929) and *The Cabot voyages and Bristol discovery under Henry VII* (1962); J. T. Medina, *El veneciano Sebastián Caboto al servicio de España*, 2 vols. (1908). Roberto Almagià, *Commemorazione di Sebastiano Caboto nel IV centenario della morte* (Venice, 1958), is an excellent survey of his influence. R. A. Skelton's article on him, in *Dictionary of Canadian biography*, I (1965), is the best short account in English. G. P. Winship, *Cabot bibliography* (2nd ed. 1900) is still of great value for his bibliography. There still remain many gaps in our knowledge of his life at certain periods.

some Bristol men. At the same time, his association with Bristol was sufficiently close for a long enough period to justify students of Bristol history in giving him an honoured place among their great men.

ii

Sebastian Cabot made three statements about his birth. The first to Gasparo Contarini, the Venetian representative in Spain, in 1522, was that he was born in Venice and brought up in England; the second, some time before 1550, to a gentleman of Mantua, that he reached England from Venice only when he was old enough to have already mastered the classics and the sphere; and the third to Richard Eden, before 1555, that he was born in Bristol, that he was brought at the age of four years to Venice and that he later came to Bristol with his family.

His father, Giovanni (or Zuan) Caboto, was said in 1498 to have been, originally, a Genoese, but his family has never been positively identified in Genoa.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps as early as 1461 he settled in Venetian territories and in 1476 was accepted as a Venetian citizen, at which time there was no mention of his having a wife or children. Between 1482 and 1484 Giovanni Caboto married, and early in 1484 gave his wife, Mattea, some property in security for her dowry, suggesting that his marriage was not very far behind him, though later, at the end of the year, Caboto is described as the father of sons. By December, 1584, therefore, his wife had borne him either two or more sons in succession or, perhaps, twins. This was at Chioggia, one of the Venetian islands. One of these children was, almost certainly, Sebastiano, another his elder brother Ludovico. Whether their young brother Sancio was born in Venice we cannot tell. Giovanni Caboto was described as a merchant, and he was employed in the Mediterranean trade, probably to Alexandria, where the Venetians collected spices, medicines, dyes and silks brought by Arab traders from Asia. Like other venturesome Italians of the fifteenth century, he penetrated into the Muslim lands in the guise of a pilgrim to Mecca, and evidently returned safely without being unmasked and punished. This gave him an abiding interest in the source of the rich commodities which came from the East. It seems probable that, sometime later, perhaps

1. On the early history of the Cabot family see R. Gallo, 'Intorno a Giovanni Caboto', *Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, Rendiconti della classe di scienze morali, storiche e filologiche*, ser. 8, vol. III (1948), 209-20; Williamson (1962), pp. 190-8; M. Ballesteros Gaibrois, 'Juan Caboto en España', *Revista de Indias*, IV (1943), 607-27; R. Almagià, 'Sulle navigazioni di Giovanni Caboto', *Rivista Geografica Italiana*, LXVII (1960), 1-12.



about 1490. he moved to Spain with his wife and family and finally settled in Valencia where he was known as Juan Caboto Montecalunya, the Venetian. He was evidently building up some reputation as a cartographer and a navigator, and it was probably shortly after he reached Spain that he approached officials and merchants, first in Seville and then in Lisbon, with plans for a westward voyage across the Atlantic from Europe to the oriental land of Cathay which he knew from Marco Polo's account. He equipped himself with both a world map and a globe, the latter made by himself, but evidently had no success. We do not know where and how his quest crossed that of Columbus, who had from before 1485 onwards been engaged on a similar quest and who eventually won the support of Queen Isabella and was enabled by her to make his decisive voyage to discover the West Indies in 1492. In that year Juan Caboto Montecalunya was advising the authorities at Valencia on the construction of a new harbour for the city. He designed and coloured plans for this project, but in 1493 it was decided not to adopt them and the scheme dropped. Thus it was apparently after Columbus's triumphant return with news that he had found the Indies by a westward voyage and had left a colony on an island off, as he thought, the shores of Japan, that Juan Caboto was forced, at the end of his consulting job, to leave Valencia. He now decided that he could revive his project for an approach to Asia by the westward route if he could convince the merchants or rulers of one of the more northerly countries that a shorter and cheaper approach could be made to Asia in northerly latitudes and that this would neutralise the initial advantage which Columbus had given Spain. Accordingly, he and his family left Spain for England and settled in Bristol. John and Mattea Cabot, with their children Lewis, Sebastian and Sancius, take on an English guise. The time of their arrival was apparently between 1493 and 1495.

iii

The story of how Englishmen began to voyage into western waters has been greatly revised in recent years.<sup>1</sup> In 1497, an English merchant, John Day trading from Bristol to Spain (now identified by Dr. A. A. Ruddock as another name for Hugh Say of London) wrote about John Cabot's 1497 voyage to a Spanish Grand Admiral, almost certainly to be identified with Columbus, that the land Cabot had seen 'was found and discovered in times past by the men of Bristol as your lordship well knows'. This is a strong claim, by a man who seemed to know what he was talking

1. See note 1 on succeeding page.

about, for a pre-Columbian discovery of America by the Bristol men. Some authorities regard this discovery to have been made long before 1497 and to have been lost sight of; others that it was made by Bristol navigators in the not so distant past. One of Bristol's numerous John Jays was part-owner of a ship commanded by a Bristol navigator called Lloyd which went in search of the Isle of Brasil in the Atlantic in 1480 but did not find it; another expedition, in which the customs official Thomas Croft had a share, went out in 1481 on a similar errand. The *George* and the *Trinity*, sent on this expedition, are the first Bristol ships whose names we know which were engaged in overseas prospecting. Setting out in July, they were apparently back in September after an absence of not more than three months. Though we have no positive statement to prove it, they may well have touched at some part of America, which they regarded as the Isle of Brasil. Croft, as Professor Carus-Wilson has shown, was a member of a syndicate licensed in 1480 to send ships to sea without observing the ordinary restrictions on the export of certain goods. A possible inference is that they were engaged on a search for Atlantic Islands and that their search was rewarded, though, if so, nothing is known of the way they exploited their finds. From 1490 or 1491, yearly for seven years, two to four ships sailed annually, we are told in 1498, into the Atlantic looking for the Isle of Brasil or the Seven Cities (another imaginary island on the charts, also called Antilia). This could mean that up to twenty-eight ships left Bristol in those years not for commerce but for exploration alone. Such an investment was quite beyond the financial resources of Bristol as we know them at that time. The 1481 vessel had carried enough

1. The progress of modern research on this problem may be followed in R. A. Skelton, 'English knowledge of the Portuguese discoveries in the fifteenth century', Congresso Internacional de História dos Descobrimientos, *Actas*, II (1961), 365-74; L. A. Vigneras, 'New light on the 1497 Cabot voyage', *Hispanic-American Historical Review*, XXXVI (1956), 503-9, 'The Cape Breton landfall: 1494 or 1497', *Canadian Historical Review*, XXXVIII (1957), 219-28, 'Etat présent des études sur Jean Cabot', C.I.H.D., *Actas*, III (1961), 657-70; D. B. Quinn, 'The argument for the English discovery of America between 1480 and 1494', *Geographical Journal*, CXXVII (1961), 277-85, 'John Day and Columbus', *Idem*, CXXXIII (1967), 205-9, 'Etat présent des études sur la redécouverte de l'Amérique au XV<sup>e</sup> siècle', *Journal de la Société des Américanistes*, LV (1966), 343-82; M. Mahn-Lot, 'Colomb, Bristol et l'Atlantique Nord', *Annales*, XIX (1964), 522-30; M. H. Jackson, 'The Labrador landfall of John Cabot', *Canadian Historical Review*, XLIV (1963), 122-41; L. Campeau, 'Jean Cabot et la découverte de l'Amérique du Nord', *Revue de l'Histoire de l'Amérique française*, XIX (1965), 397-408; A. A. Ruddock, 'John Day of Bristol and the English voyages across the Atlantic before 1497', *G.J.*, CXXXII (1966), 222-33.

salt to indicate that its owners were making a search for new fisheries: the suggestion about the later vessels is that they were going fishing across the Atlantic, perhaps to the Newfoundland Banks, and thought of the island that they saw there—the Brasil of the earlier discovery—as simply an inhospitable landmark for the fishery, not worth recording in the annals (or ‘Calendars’) kept by so many of the town’s merchant families. This situation could have changed sharply after the discoveries made by Columbus in 1492 and later became known to the Bristol traders who frequented Spain, since if Columbus had found the Indies by a westwards voyage, sooner or later it would occur to the Bristol men that they could do the same.

How and when did the Cabots come on the scene? We should probably discount firmly Sebastian Cabot’s statement as an old man that he was born in Bristol, lived there until he was four years old and was then taken to Venice. This would put John Cabot’s first residence in Bristol back to well before 1480, while there is no indication that he was in England much before 1496. It is true that in a map published in 1544 for which Sebastian Cabot supplied some information it was stated that the Cabot discovery of America took place in 1494, but there seems nothing to support this and a good deal to set against it. Because, in connection with the Bristol voyages between 1490 and 1497, John Cabot was cited as giving his opinion that the English were looking for Brasil or the Seven Cities it has been thought that he inspired or directed these voyages himself and so was in Bristol by 1490, but this meaning does not necessarily attach to the text of the document concerned, while the evidence about Juan Caboto in Valencia in 1492-3 stands in its way. The earliest appearance of the Cabots in England cannot be firmly dated, but was not, it seems, much earlier than 1494.

Soon after this arrival in Bristol, John Cabot put to sea. A voyage was begun with one ship but there was some confusion about the route, he was short of supplies and he decided to put back. This is all we know of a voyage made between 1494 and 1496. It is not unlikely that it was an attempt made in imitation of those of the Bristol men to establish what, in fact, they were doing out at sea. Its most likely date was 1495, but this is only one of several possible solutions. The first datable evidence of the Cabots is when John, with his sons Lewis, Sebastian and Sancio, on 5 March 1496, petitioned Henry VII for a royal patent which was granted on the same day. The Spaniards had evidence in 1496 that he had arrived in England and may have learnt something of his

first voyage. Henry VII had not taken up the offer of Bartholomew Columbus in 1488 or 1489 from his brother Christopher to lead an expedition to Japan and Cathay, but he knew enough about his plans to understand the apparent implications of Columbus' discovery. Cabot could put his own plan for reaching Asia more rapidly by a voyage from Bristol, using islands which the Bristol men had discovered as stepping stones on the way, with the certainty of being understood at court. The first patent empowered Cabot and his sons to find out lands not known to any Christian peoples, to the north, east and west of Henry's dominions and to annex them to the crown, taking authority themselves to govern the lands and to receive certain customs privileges for goods brought therefrom to Bristol. The grant, which was valid for up to five ships, was sufficient to transform the position of John Cabot at Bristol. No longer a foreign interloper, he could be admitted to the secret of making an Atlantic crossing to the fishing Banks (if the argument above is acceptable) and allowed to try his luck in going still further to the west towards the Farthest East.

The second voyage, the first to be successful, was nevertheless made in a single ship. We depend on one of the many Bristol calendars or town chronicles (that of Maurice Toby, destroyed 1860) for the clearest statement on the first voyage according to which the *Matthew*, a Bristol ship, set out by Bristol merchants, left Bristol on May 2, reached land across the Atlantic on June 24 and returned to Bristol on August 6. It was, from other accounts, a small ship of 50 tons, with only eighteen to twenty men on board, and was victualled for seven or eight months. Was Sebastian Cabot among them? It might appear that he was, even though he was likely to have been only thirteen or fourteen years old at the time, as a legend on the 1544 map gives the right date, June 24, though the wrong year (1494) and states that the discovery was made by both father and son. It should, however, also be clear that if this information came from Sebastian himself he was no longer wholly reliable about such distant events.

The John Day letter differs from Maurice Toby (writing perhaps as late as 1565) in putting the beginning of the voyage as late in May but adds other details of importance. The outward voyage took some thirty-five days before an east-north-east wind and was fair until the *Matthew* ran into a storm about the thirty-second or thirty-third day out. They made a landfall, apparently on the thirty-fifth day, and seem to have explored a little to the south before turning north once again. Going ashore, near their first landfall, they observed tall pine trees suitable for masts. They saw



no people but found a place where fire had been made and picked up a carved and painted stick as evidence of human occupation. They then worked their way northwards and set out again into the Atlantic, from the cape nearest to Ireland, after a month's exploration. They had a remarkable voyage back, sighting land after only fifteen days, but it was Brittany not Land's End, and the *Matthew* had to make her way northwards from there to the Bristol Channel and home. Day says that these discoveries were made between the limits of Dursey Head in the south-west of Ireland and the River of Bordeaux (the Garonne) between, that is, 46° 35' and 51° 35' North latitude.

John Day was sure that Cabot had found the great island of the Seven Cities or even a mainland, and so were other contemporary informants, while they also mention two islands he discovered on his way back shortly after leaving land. He is said to have brought some snares and a netting needle as evidence of human occupation. He was convinced that he had merely to return and work steadily southwards and eastwards to Japan, from which he would reach the dominions of the Great Khan. By this he meant the Mongol-dominated China of the thirteenth century as described by Marco Polo, though China had, since 1368, been under a native dynasty, the Ming. He was able to exhibit his world map and globe and he soon sketched out rough indications of his discoveries, one version of which was forwarded by John Day to Columbus about December 1497 (he had hoped to send a map, i.e. the discoveries placed in relation to known lands), and another by Pedro de Ayala, a Spanish representative in England of Ferdinand and Isabella, in July 1498. Ayala had been one of the commissioners who had negotiated the treaty of Tordesillas with Portugal in 1494 and knew both the details of Columbus' first two voyages and the supposed implications of the division of the overseas world between Spain and Portugal. He wrote that Cabot's cape (presumably the one nearest Ireland) lay, in his opinion, inside the Spanish zone. In this he was correct, though the Portuguese placed their discoveries of Greenland, Labrador and Newfoundland a little later, inside their own sphere, giving a clear example how difficulties in establishing longitude could have political implications.

The remarkable world map made, or at least begun, by Juan de la Cosa in 1500 has on it a stretch of coast, part of an unbroken coastline from far in the north to well below the equator, which is apparently intended for Eastern Asia, which is marked out by English flags and has some inscriptions relating to English exploration along the coast from *Mar descubierta por Inglese* (English-

found Sea) in the south-west to *Cauo de Inglaterra* (Cape England) in the north-east, the latter with several islands lying offshore. As Father Campeau has pointed out, these features lie opposite to the River of Bordeaux and Dursey Head, respectively, as the John Day letter indicates and so suggest that Cosa had John Day's letter and sketch before him. It is not nearly so easy to identify where the places reached by the Cabots may have been. North America between latitudes 40° and 60° N. latitude presents an angular outline towards Europe. The apex is Newfoundland (with Cape Race in 46° 38' N. at the tip), the northern arm receding almost to Cape Chidley at 60° and the southern to just south of Long Island at 40°. The Cape nearest Ireland is Cape Race, but this is about 5 degrees of latitude south of Dursey Head. If, similarly, the River of Bordeaux is placed at 46° 35' N. then an appropriate North American equivalent would be between 41 and 42° N. namely Cape Cod or the Gulf of Maine (so that the first landfall could be in modern Massachusetts, Maine or Nova Scotia). A run down along the latitude from Cape Race on the way back would bring the *Matthew* directly to the mouth of the Garonne. It is very unlikely that deductions of this sort can be made with any approach to exactitude at a time when latitude determination at sea could easily be two or three degrees in error, but, with all due scepticism, they are rough indications of what may have taken place.

Another approach can be made by taking a different starting point. Soncino, writing to the duke of Milan on 18 December 1497, after a meeting with John Cabot, says that he passed Ireland, then bore north, and finally after several days, turned west. Mr. Melvin H. Jackson, taking his lead from this reference, has argued that Cabot is likely to have taken Achill Head as a departure point and to have followed the 54th parallel, so he brings Cabot to land at 52° 30' N. in Labrador after various adjustments, makes his coasting voyage involve an almost entire circumnavigation of Newfoundland and his final point of departure Fogo Island. J. A. Williamson, who knew the Cabot materials better than anyone else, and whose opinion is entitled to great respect, thought that Maine and Nova Scotia were the most likely candidates for the landfall and Cape Breton or Cape Race (he somewhat favoured the former) the most probable points of departure. There have been many other theories, but the range of Williamson's alternatives is most likely to include the land actually reached by Cabot.

John Cabot brought overflowing news—or confirmation—of the great fishery off the Newfoundland coast, but he was set fair very

+

muy mag<sup>do</sup> señor

1533  
L. a

Oy dia del bien aventurado san Juan recebi una carta del adelantado de  
 en persona por la qual me pater que toda via tiene gana de tomar la  
 adelantado medio la carta y me dixo que va alla y lleve a carta  
 del dingo de la carta para los señores del conseyo para la dicha en pe  
 sa plega dies nro señor de examinarlo todo como si fuese a tola  
 sea almenada y el ynezados nro señor senido.

señor la carta q vin fnd me embio amandari q yziese ya la tengo  
 acabada y dada al conador de la casa de la conestacion para me  
 la embie la vin fnd suplico a vna fnd me pordone por no averla  
 acabado mas presto y en verdad sino fuera por la muerte de  
 my gña y por la dolencia de my mujer y mya dias ha q vna  
 fnd la fny era recebid. bien pense de llecharla yo mismo  
 co otanos dos q tengo fecho para su matzeco q su matzeco y los  
 señores del conseyo quidaron satisfechos della por q oclmco  
 no se puede na vez por sedendo por sus deotas como seaze pa  
 una carta y la carta por q no desta y no desta la quya y comee  
 foroso q loya y que tanto quanta. ade no de pcha y no de  
 azlante q por la abluense aza el norte y en que me zibiano  
 y con esto una su matz la regla gicra para tomar la longitud

señor suplico a vna fnd me agam de escriuir a estos señores  
 oficiales de la casa de la conestacion que me secan conon  
 relcio de my salario adelantado pta que me pcha de senapcha  
 de aqui ex alla abechar las manos de vna fnd y a alla con los  
 señores del conseyo y llevarles un criado myo que quedo en la  
 costa del brasil el qual vino con los portugeses q de alla vinie  
 ron. para q de relcio de tolo q alla un fecho los portugeses  
 y esto suplico a vna fnd allende de otanos muchos mdo que  
 de vna fnd tengo recebid. nro señor guarde la magin pe  
 sona de vna fnd y esto acciente como por vna fnd q de sea  
 do y vnos senidos es de sean a my senom dona juana de sola  
 mnox. / de senilla. oy dia del bien aventurado san Juan del  
 1533 mdo

besa las manos de vna fnd  
 su muy cierto senido

Sebastian Cabot

Letter with his signature, from Sebastian Cabot to Juan de Samano, 24 June, 1533. Reproduced with transcript and translation in H. Harris, John Cabot . . . and Sebastian his son, 1896, pp. 282, 428-30.

soon for another voyage to Japan and Cathay as the fishery was not directly his concern. A reward of £10 in August was followed by a pension of £20 a year, a large sum, in December. He is described as being, before his success, a poor man. Now he was, by contemporary standards, rich. It was probably at this time that he rented from Philip Grene, a prominent Bristol merchant and landowner, a house in St Nicholas Street, not far from the bridge, for which he agreed to pay the annual rent of 40s. Reunited with Mattea, Lewis, Sebastian and Sancio, John Cabot, dressed in silk and courted by the crowd whether in Bristol or in London, was suddenly a public figure. Like Columbus, he too was called the Grand Admiral, though it is unlikely that any such title was conferred on him by Henry VII. But the king was, this time, willing to furnish a ship for John Cabot. Lawrence Thirkill was paid to equip his own ship, which was apparently something under 200 tons burden, for the king's service, and appears to have been her master on the third voyage. London as well as Bristol merchants were now willing to adventure goods for sale in her and in the other four smaller vessels which assembled at Bristol. Cabot was busily disposing of islands in his new regime and jokingly granting his friends titles. The fleet sailed early in May.

The second expedition was lucky; the third unlucky. The fleet made for Ireland and set out to sea possibly (unless Mr. Jackson is right about 1497) on a more northerly course than the previous year. After some time one ship turned back, presumably because of bad weather, and reached Ireland. No news of other returning vessels had come to London by September, and it would seem, as Polydore Vergil wrote some years later, that John Cabot was lost at sea. One ship at least got back, apparently the king's (though we would expect Cabot to have been using her as a flagship), as Thirkill and his associate Thomas Bradley are found later on in the royal service. Whether any other ships came home is not known. Nor has anything been found, in spite of many attempts to piece the cartographical evidence into some sort of meaningful pattern, on what, if anything, was discovered in America.

This is a very different verdict on the 1498 voyage than that which was current earlier this century and was expounded by H. P. Biggar as recently as 1932.<sup>1</sup> It was one which placed Sebastian Cabot with his father on the voyage and (according to whether or not the writer favoured Sebastian or John) and assumed he led or usurped his father's leadership of the expedi-

1. In *The great age of discovery*, ed. A. P. Newton (1932), pp. 134-7.



tion which passed first to icy northern waters and then turned south for a long coasting voyage. This evidence is now believed to belong to a later voyage, and so the question of whether Sebastian accompanied his father in 1498 is quite unanswerable. If he did, he was not sailing on the same ship as his father when disaster struck, and his was one of those which returned safely. Cathay it was now evident, was not just across the Atlantic, where a convict squad could be set to construct a trading post from which ships could sail southwards to tap the riches of the East. It may even have been the 1498 expedition which provided the first inkling that the land to the west was not Asia but a new landmass of continental dimensions.

iv

John Cabot's pension was paid up to the end of September 1499, and his rent up to the same date, as he might well have been expected to return at the end of a second season's sailing. But he was then, it seems clear, given up for dead. The Cabot family, fatherless, was left to begin a new, independent, and possibly somewhat poverty-stricken existence in Bristol. We know no more of Sebastian's mother or his brothers, and of himself nothing until 1505. In that interval further voyages from Bristol had taken place, even though the Cabot patent of 1496 was still potentially operative. In March 1501 a new group was chartered to make voyages and to colonise lands not yet found by Christians. It consisted of three Bristol men, Richard Warde, Thomas Asshehurst and John Thomas, with three Portuguese from the Azores, João Fernandes, Francisco Fernandes and João Gonsalves. None of these is known to have had any connection with the Cabot voyages, though John Thomas had, like the Cabots, been a tenant of Philip Grene in 1498-9. A voyage was made to America in 1501 and from it a number of Bristol men returned and were duly rewarded by King Henry in January 1502, while another voyage was made in 1502 when similar rewards were given in September. But it may be that João Fernandes and possibly some of the Bristol grantees did not return from this second voyage and, like John Cabot, were lost at sea. Consequently, we find a new grant made in December to Asshehurst, Gonsalves, Francisco Fernandes and, a new name, Hugh Eliot. Eliot's inclusion may indicate a link with the Cabots. In 1527, Robert Thorne the younger claimed that his father, Robert Thorne the Elder and Hugh Eliot were the first to find the New Land over the ocean. It may be that his claim was that they made or took part in the first discovery referred to by John Day, which we have seen could have taken place in 1481 or between 1481 and 1491, but it is also possible, and perhaps more likely that

they were with John Cabot in his 1497 discovery. Moreover, the elder Robert Thorne and Hugh Eliot were associated in the purchase of a French ship, renamed the *Gabriell* of Bristol, in January 1502, so it may be that they were reviving an old association with the Cabots. This is a tenuous link with which to bring in Sebastian Cabot, but it is not wholly improbable that he was associated in some way with this new syndicate between 1502 and 1505. A red-painted bow and arrows and hawks were brought from a voyage in 1503: a priest was said to be going out in 1504: wild cats ('cats of the mountain' (lynxes?)) and 'popynjays' (some kind of parrot or paroquet) in 1505. In 1505 or 1506 a London merchant, William Clerk, claimed he had supplied Hugh Eliot with £144 18s. 6d. worth of goods, some for the 'Company adventurers into the new found islands' and some adventured and lost by Clerk, 'in the voyage for the Company Adventurers prepared into the new found lands'. The syndicate then, apparently, ceased operations. We cannot tell exactly how far it ranged. We may suggest that it attempted and failed to establish some trade with the North American Indians (in furs, perhaps, as well as in eagles, hawks and such like) and that the 'popynjays' of 1505 may suggest that a penetration at least as far south as southern New England was achieved to bring home some specimens of the long-extinct Carolina Paroquet (or could it have been found further north, traded up from New England?).

Did Sebastian take part in any of these voyages? We cannot prove positively that he did. As 'Sebastian Caboot Venetian' he emerges as a person in his own right for the first time when he receives a pension of £10 a year from King Henry on 3 April 1505.<sup>1</sup> It was to be paid from the customs receipts of Bristol, indicating that Sebastian still had his home there, while the services for which it was given were 'in consideration of the diligent service and attendance that (he) hath done unto us in and about' the town and port of Bristol. It sounds as if they were local services rather than the result of his participation in overseas voyages, but even this is not clear. It is almost certain that by this time Cabot was a trained and practising surveyor and cartographer. He may have assisted in drawing up plans for new fortifications or harbour works (as his father had apparently done earlier in Valencia). But it is just possible that he had made some enduring cartographic records of the voyages down to, and including, that of 1504 which

1. A. P. Newton, 'An early grant to Sebastian Cabot', *English Historical Review*, XXXVII (1922), 564-5; Williamson (1929), p. 70, (1962), p. 265.

had been made across the North Atlantic, whether or not he had been on any of the voyages himself. The evidence for this is most exiguous, but there were certainly extant one or more manuscript maps of his (as well as a version of his printed map of 1544 or 1549) in the Palace of Whitehall late in the sixteenth century, while a collection of his maps and discourses was in the hands of his associate in old age, William Worthington, as late as 1582, though they disappeared without being described in detail. As an outside guess, it might be suggested that his service to the king could have consisted in showing by his cartographical work that North America was not an island, but a great independent land mass which extended far to north and south and which could be circumvented, if at all, by a long roundabout voyage by the North-west or South-west before Asia could be reached. In this case, he would have anticipated Waldseemüller's epoch-making globe and map of 1507. But if Sebastian Cabot sketched out his idea of a North-west Passage before 1508, no record of it survives.

On the other hand, there is adequate evidence that he set out on just such a voyage in 1508.<sup>1</sup> He did not need royal permission to do this since the 1496 patent was sufficient authority. No royal grants to assist him have so far been traced. But he wrote much later to Ramusio that the ships in which he sailed were supplied at the king's expense, while another account says they were two in number and with 300 men on board. This latter figure is very high for a mere exploring or trading voyage and suggests that a half-way trading post was intended to be placed on the shores of the North-west Passage if it should be discovered. A number of the accounts agree that he sailed so far north that 'even in the month of July he found great icebergs floating in the sea and almost continuous daylight, yet with the land free by the melting of the ice'. How far north did he go? In one account he is said to have determined his latitude by the quadrant (on shore?) as 55° N. in July; in another, derived from a letter of his, he claimed a latitude of 67° 30' on June 11. The master of his ship, it is said, was unwilling to go further, while the sailors turned mutinous, so that, though the sea was open and he thought he could pass through to Cathay, he had to turn back. At 55° he would be just north of Hamilton Inlet in Labrador, at 67° 30', well up the coast of Baffin Island. He can plausibly have been supposed to have reached Cape Chidley at the entrance to Hudson Strait at about

1. The 1508-9 voyage was first discussed as such by G. P. Winship, *Cabot bibliography* (2nd ed., 1900), pp. xvii-xviii: it was fully investigated by Williamson (1929 and 1962), and is now generally accepted.

60°, though whether he entered it cannot be established. There are later cartographical indications which suggest that he had done so.<sup>1</sup>

The second stage of Sebastian Cabot's voyage consisted of a long coasting expedition down the east coast to North America. It may be that he made probing ventures into various gulfs and bays as he went southwards, but it may also alternatively be the case that he passed rapidly southwards in search of a South-west passage round the North American landmass, as a genuine alternative to the North-west Passage he had found so intractable. If we knew more about his ideas or his resources we should find it easier to make positive suggestions. If he knew, for example, of Waldseemüller's revolutionary map and globe, printed in 1507, he would see there a southern continental landmass, quite detached from Asia and separated from it by a wide ocean (and named for the first time 'America'). It had also an unnamed landmass in the place of North America, which had a similar relationship to Asia but which had passages round it both to the North-west and the South-west through which access to Asia by an intervening ocean might be attained. Had this been in his possession, Cabot could well have found confirmation of his own concepts of a North-west Passage and inspiration for a voyage in search of a South-west Passage as well. At some place on his southward route it is probable that he wintered for several months, but how far south he was at this point cannot even be conjectured. We are told in the earliest surviving account of his voyage that 'he extended his course furthermore to the southward owing to the curve of the coastline, so that his latitude was almost that of the Straits of Gibraltar [36° N., approximately the latitude of Cape Hatteras, but with a large plus or minus error to be allowed for] and he penetrated so far to the west that he had the island of Cuba on his left hand almost in the same longitude with himself,'—which would have been true from Cape Hatteras southwards, though few longitudes are even approximately accurate at this time. On his way Cabot remarked the great quantities of fish to be seen, and he made some contacts with North American Indians, finding 'the men of those lands clothed in skins and not anywhere devoid of intelligence'. His decision to return without following the North

1. On the other hand the veteran seaman, Philip Jones, who had known Wyndham's pilot in 1553 and probably Cabot himself, said in 1586, when he was arguing the case for a North-west passage at 66-67° N., that 'Bastian Caboto' did not reach 'above 52 degrees' (B. M. Harleian MS 167, fo. 107r).



American landmass far enough to the south to ascertain whether or not there was a South-west Passage round it may have been because he feared, rightly, that if he went any further he would come into the area already occupied by the Spaniards. His voyage home may have been the first by an English expedition by way of the Gulf Stream, and he arrived to find Henry VII dead and his son on the throne as Henry VIII.

How reliable is this narrative? In the first place the greater part of it (apart from dates and narratives) comes from Peter Martyr's account published in 1516 and collected from Cabot's own words between 1512 and 1515, so that it is likely to represent Sebastian's recollections when they were still fresh. The number of ships and an indication of latitude comes in a work of the same author's published in 1534; a firm indication of date derives from a third work by Peter Martyr written in 1524 (but published in 1530) which puts the voyage as taking place sixteen years before, thus making it 1508. A Venetian account of 1536 (a late one, but otherwise well informed) says he returned to find 'the King dead, and his son cared little for such an enterprise'. The rambling account of a Mantuan gentleman to the great Venetian collector of voyage narratives, Ramusio, of a conversation with Sebastian Cabot has produced a good deal of confusion. John Cabot is said there to have died about the time Columbus discovered the Indies and Sebastian's voyage took place, 'I believe, in 1496': it is quite clear that the conversation was ill-remembered. Ramusio later had a letter from Cabot giving him some specific information about latitude reached (the high  $67^{\circ} 30'$  in this case), the mutiny of his men and a few other things. The Spanish historian, Francisco Lopez de Gómera, in a book published in 1552, gives the range of latitudes covered as between  $58^{\circ}$  in the North and  $38^{\circ}$  or  $25^{\circ}$  N. in the South. Willes in 1577 gives some details of the passage Cabot claimed to have found between  $61^{\circ}$  and  $64^{\circ}$  N. None of the other sixteenth century accounts seem, on close examination, to be of any value. We may conclude with J. A. Williamson, who devoted much skilful research and argument to the task, that the basic story of the first independent voyage by Sebastian Cabot is reasonably well established. At the same time, it is likely that his own story, as told at different times after it occurred, was, like his account of his birth and childhood, inconsistent in detail. His figures for latitude reached seem to have varied; his statements about whether he or Henry VII paid for the ships did not match; he may even have dithered about dates. But his voyage was, in many respects, a landmark in English exploration because it

brought to an end one considerable chapter in overseas venturing in western waters.

How much relevance the voyage of 1508-9 had to Bristol itself is unknown. We do not know whether the ships came from London or Bristol or whether or not Bristol merchants, in spite of disillusionment with the syndicates of 1501-5, put trade goods for Cathay on board. It is likely, but by no means certain, that a Bristol element in the voyage persisted and that the ships took their departure, at least, from Bristol as all the other western ventures had done. His voyage is likely to have done much to delimit the north-eastern shores of North America provided he kept full records of his landfalls and drew his charts on his return. Bristol merchants and sailors, if he made them free of his knowledge, could have been more fully informed about the nature and extent of North America than almost all Western Europeans of the time. What was known was not inviting, so that the Bristol men stuck to a certain amount of fishing at Newfoundland and, so far as we know, gave over trading with the mainland and searching for new trades.

V

After Cabot's return in 1509 the sense of further voyaging was not obvious. Clearly, the young Henry VIII was not interested in carrying on a series of enterprises which had been, from the national point of view, conspicuously unprofitable. Married to a Spanish wife, he had no intention of competing in the Spanish Indies in the West which Sebastian Cabot must have admitted, if he was questioned on his voyage, would have been the inevitable result of trying to find a South-West Passage round North America. There was no incentive whatever for Bristol merchants to spend further money on what must now have seemed quite vain hopes of trading directly with the Far East. It is true that there were, throughout these years, a few Bristol ships going out regularly each year for the Newfoundland fishery, but this had settled into a few hands, had become routine and had little to do with expensive speculation on voyaging to Cathay. If the suggestion that Bristol was quietly sending to the Newfoundland fishery each year between 1491 and 1496 is correct, then the picture from 1496 to 1509 and later was probably precisely or almost precisely the same. We have no details as fish does not appear on the few customs accounts which survive, but by 1520 Bristol had a hand in the fishing fleet which annually sailed from western ports to Newfoundland.

Sebastian Cabot cut most, though not all, of his ties with Bristol, so far as we can tell, not long after his return in 1509. He married a Londoner, whose Christian name was Joanna, and had at least one daughter (Elizabeth), but it seems almost as likely that their home was by the Thames as by the Avon. He remained in the royal service and was employed with an English force in war against France in 1512. His cartographical abilities were recognised in a reward paid to him on May 1 for making a map of Gascony and Guienne, but this was to be his last direct service to the Tudors for some years. It would seem that he commended himself to Henry VIII's father-in-law, Ferdinand I, as a pilot and cartographer skilled in the navigation in the Indies<sup>1</sup> and, after some discussion at Burgos, he was released by Lord Willoughby, his captain, for service in Spain, the letter Ferdinand wrote to him mentioning specifically 'the navigation of the Indies and the Island of the Bacallaos [Newfoundland]'. For thirty-six years, after a short visit to England, including probably a little time in Bristol, to wind up his affairs and to collect his wife and family, Sebastian Cabot was to settle down as a Spanish official though he did not entirely lose his contacts with England and, specifically, with Bristol.

vi

In Spain Sebastian Cabot was employed as one of the pilots of the Casa de Contratación at Seville from which the Indies trade was carried on. It would seem that his duties involved rather instruction of seamen in pilotage and in the construction of charts than the exercise of his craft at sea. He was evidently highly successful since he succeeded to the office of chief pilot in 1518. He was now not only head of the pilot school but also responsible for keeping up to date the official map of the Indies, the *padrón real*, on which instructions for voyages between Spain and the Indies were based.

The discovery of the Pacific Ocean, across the Isthmus of Darien in 1513, set in motion a movement in Spain to find a direct sea passage to Asia now that it was clear that an ocean voyage to the Spice Islands and Cathay was necessary once America was left behind. Sebastian Cabot was quite frank in telling Peter Martyr that he believed in the existence of a North-west Passage. If this is so we may ask why he did not succeed in getting Spain to put his experience and theory to the test. The answer is that a North-west Passage at, say, 60° N. would not suit the Spaniards.

1. Medina (1908), 1, 2-3; H. P. Biggar, *Precursors of Jacques Cartier* (1911), pp. 115-116; Williamson (1929), pp. 83-4, (1962), p. 281.

Northern waters were mainly the preserve of the English, the Portuguese and the French and there Spain would find seamen from these countries ready to challenge her monopoly of access to Asia by way of the West. Better no passage to Asia than one in such high latitudes. After various reconnaissances, Fernão de Magalhaes (whom we know better as Magellan), a Portuguese in the Spanish service, who had been round the Cape of Good Hope to South-east Asia with his countrymen, was sent off in 1519 to find a South-west passage around South America to Asia. We know that he succeeded, but the Spanish authorities did not learn that he had done so until the *Victoria* returned in 1522.

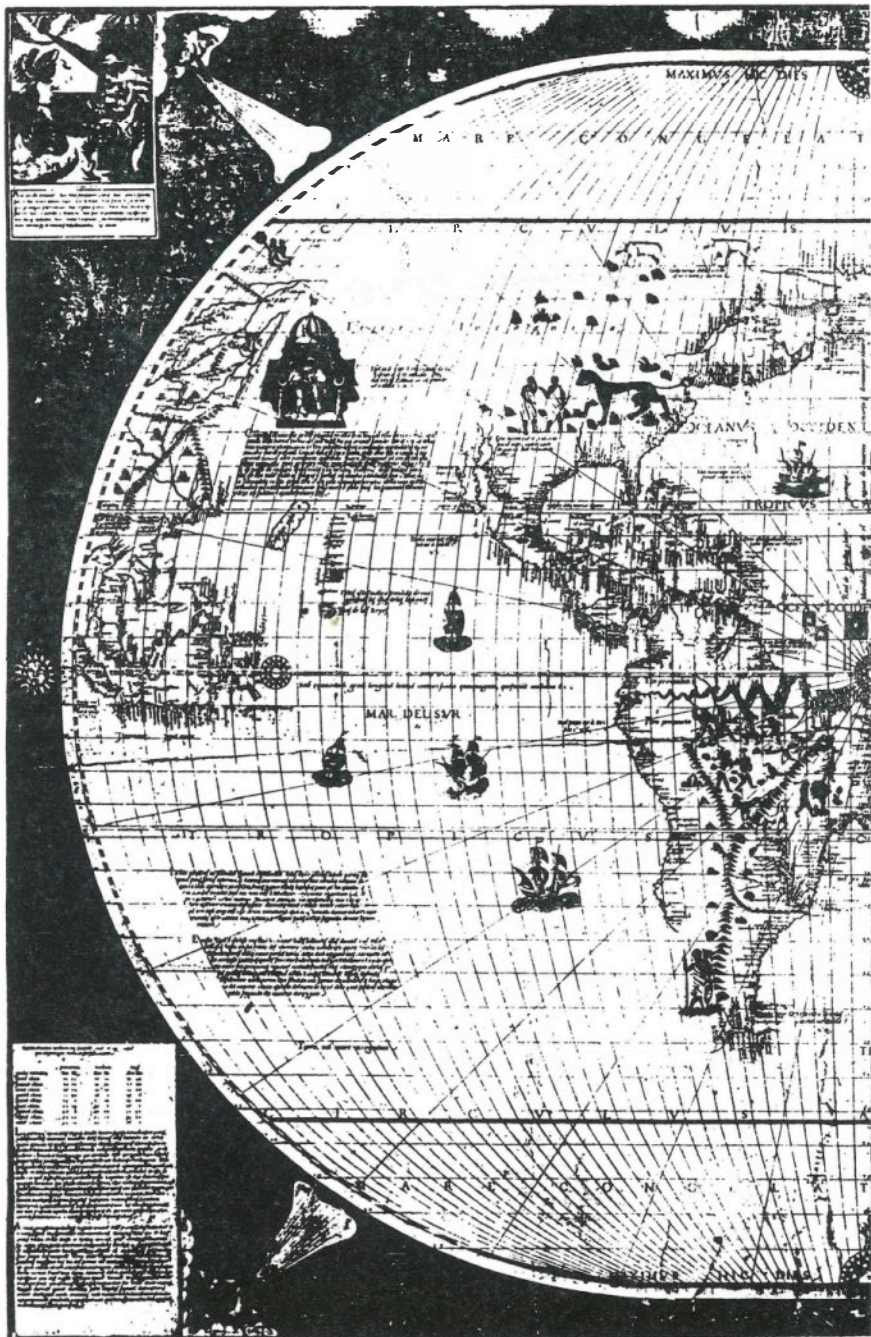
Sebastian Cabot had, in the meantime, revived his ideas of a North-west Passage. There is no reliable evidence that Cabot had anything to do with projecting English voyages between 1512 and 1520 but it was probably in the latter year that he conceived the idea of reviving a North-west voyage.<sup>1</sup> Henry VIII and his own master, Charles V, were for the moment on very good terms and he was consequently able to get permission to go to England, probably on the pretext of family affairs, since possibly his mother and, more probably, other members of his family were still living there. If he could get Henry VIII's help for a North-west venture, then he could try to do for England what Magellan was trying to do for Spain and gain more glory and even profit than he had in Seville. If he could not find support in England he could return to Spain and hope his intended defection would not get out. A reward was paid to Cabot when he came to England early in 1521, and he rapidly got the backing of the King, Cardinal Wolsey and the king's council. The English cloth trade was somewhat depressed at the time and the Merchant Adventurers of London agreed (on March 7) to supply one ship (of 100 tons), victual her for a year and pay the crew, while the crown would supply the rest of the equipment. There were to be five ships in all from London and others were also promised by Bristol with whose merchants Cabot must have been in touch directly. The plan ran into trouble from the Drapers' Company on March 11. The Wardens gathered from native born English mariners that the voyage was hazardous and too long—it was described as being 'towards the Newfound Island' or 'into the newfound Island'—while Sebastian Cabot was attacked: they think it is too risky an adventure to send five ships, men and

1. Biggar (1911), pp. 134-42; A. H. Johnson, *The history of the worshipful Company of the Drapers of London*, II (1915), 264-7; Williamson (1929), pp. 97-101; L. Lyell, ed., *Acts of court of the Mercers' Company* (1936), pp. 524-9; *Cal. letters and papers, Henry VIII*, IV, no. 366 (p. 154).

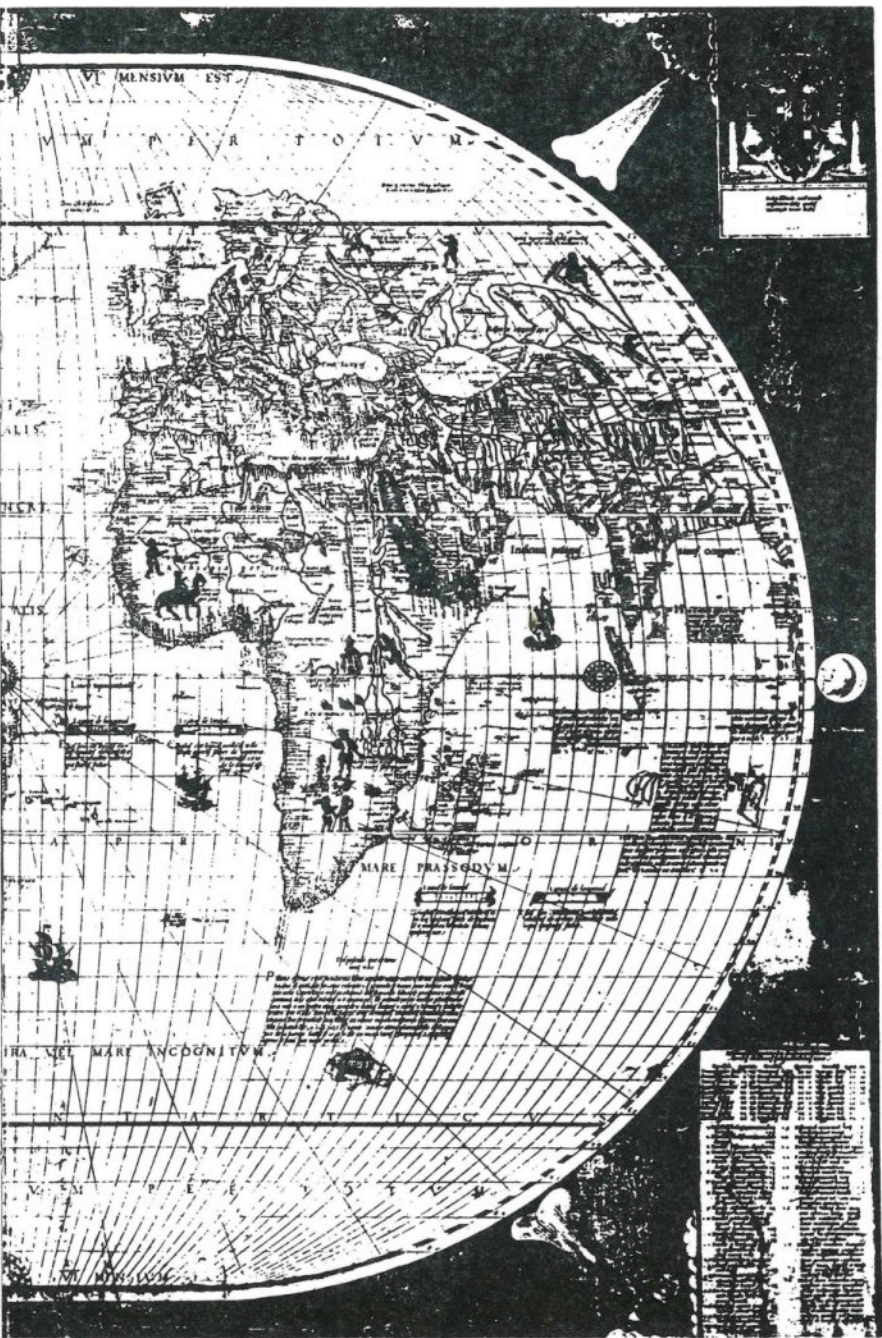
goods 'upon the singular trust of one man, called as we understand, Sebastyan, which Sebastyan, as we hear say, was never in that land himself'. He was said rather to be reporting things he had heard his father and other men speak of in times past. The result was they would put up 200 marks only. Information from the other London companies is not available, but it seems that the overall response was too unfavourable for risks to be taken and the plan was abandoned, perhaps only after it was clear that the vessels promised would not be ready in time to make a voyage that year—they would surely need to have set out in May.

This expedition was clearly intended to emulate Magellan's. Why then should there be such distrust in Sebastian? It might seem that the London merchants knew nothing of the 1508-9 voyage but did recollect the abortive assistance given by London merchants to John Cabot in 1498. Again we may ask why was Sebastian Cabot not produced to convince the merchants. The answer is probably that he was afraid to come into the open and confront the merchants as this might well have led to disclosures of his actions to Charles V. He may, in any case, when the objections arose, have been in Bristol. It is interesting to notice that his credit should have been as good there as it was bad in some circles in London. Before March 7, we are told, 'the towne of Brystowe hath sent up word and knowledge that they will prepare two ships', but there is nothing on the local records to show us why this did not lead to an independent Bristol venture, after the Londoners had become reluctant to continue. England was clearly not yet willing to invest in effective commercial challenges to Spain. Sebastian went back to his duties there. He claimed that the English fleet was almost ready when his conscience smote him and he refused to go without Charles V's permission. This might just possibly be true but he could just as well have seen that cordial relations between Henry VIII and Charles V were already breaking down and felt he would be safer on the Spanish side if it came to war. Lack of enthusiasm amongst the major companies in London meant that only a small London - Bristol venture was practicable and this was not enough for him. His further explanation—that he suddenly remembered he was a Venetian by birth and should be working for his native city—was clearly invented when he put out feelers late in 1522 to see whether there was any Venetian money available for such an enterprise. But this was just after the *Victoria* had arrived back with news that the world could be sailed around and that there was, indeed, a South-west Passage around South America to the South Sea.





WORLD MAP by Sebastian Cabot 1544.  
The original is in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.





In 1523 Spain decided to try if, after all, there was a passage through temperate North America to the Far East, but it was the Portuguese, Estevão Gomes, not Cabot, who was chosen to lead the expedition. His voyage revealed much that was of interest about the North American coastline but made it clear also that there was no passage westwards to be found south of Newfoundland, the most northerly limit of Spanish interest. Cabot, therefore, put his North-west Passage notions in cold storage and concentrated on preparing a great expedition to explore the coasts of South America and to attempt to find a passage to the Pacific in latitudes more temperate than those of the Strait of Magellan. Mobilising both private and public resources for the voyage, Cabot set sail only in 1526 'for the discovery of Tharsis, Ophir and Eastern Cathay'.<sup>1</sup>

In the course of his preparations Cabot had reinforced his connections with the English merchant community in Seville and San Lucar. He was closely in touch with Robert Thorne, whom he would have known in Bristol, and with Henry Patmer and Roger Barlow, both of whom continued to travel between Seville and Bristol in the 1520ties. It is probable that discussions between Cabot and Thorne influenced the latter's project for an English voyage to Asia over the Pole, which were presented to Henry VIII in 1527 while Cabot was absent in South America. Thorne invested over £300 and Barlow over £100, both substantial amounts, in Cabot's expedition, while Roger Barlow sailed with Cabot in the flagship. Henry Patmer, who had evidently some experience as a pilot, sailed in another vessel: a third Englishman, called Thomas Terman by the Spaniards, has not yet been identified. Cabot's command of the South-west Passage expedition was thus a means by which Englishmen were enabled for the first time to penetrate south of the Equator to the new western lands there discovered by Spain and Portugal.

The expedition was nearly four years away from Spain. Cabot showed considerable endurance and courage on the voyage, but he lacked the single-mindedness of Magellan and Elcano, and demonstrated that his judgement was often imperfect and his temper arbitrary and tyrannical. In 1526 he made for Brazil by

1. Medina (1908) is the prime authority for the Plate voyage, supplemented by Roger Barlow, *A brief summe of geographie*, ed. E. G. R. Taylor (1931). Professor Taylor's introduction is essential on Cabot's relations with the Bristol men, supplemented, on occasion, by G. Connell-Smith, *Forerunners of Drake* (1954).

way of the Canaries and the Cape Verdes, losing his flagship (though saving her complement and part of her stores), and marooning some of his men on Santa Catarina Island. He entered the River Plate (then known as the Rio de Solis) in 1527, explored the estuary, penetrated far inland by the Uruguay, San Salvador, Cacarañá and Paraguay Rivers, building forts and gold-hunting, getting some information on the riches of the western mountains (the Andes), but taking no decisive action to conclude his search for a water passage to the Pacific.

In 1528 he sent the *Trinidad* home for reinforcements. Roger Barlow, described as Cabot's lieutenant, was an officer on board her. Calderón, her commander, and Barlow, too, it is probable, reported on their experiences to Charles V, and set out the nature of Cabot's problems, but no reinforcements were, in fact, sent. Cabot sailed back in the *Santa Maria* in 1530, to face some seven years of judicial inquiry into his activities on the voyage though he was allowed to take up his post as master-pilot again in 1532. He was sentenced to four years' banishment to Morocco in 1531 but the sentence was not put into effect. Barlow, having made contact with the English ambassador—probably Thomas Boleyn, earl of Wiltshire, then on a special embassy to Spain—was recommended to Henry VIII and returned to England, apparently in 1530.

Thorne also was in England shortly after and it is thought that Barlow joined him in a project to sail northwards over the Pole which came to an end with Thorne's death in 1532. Though Barlow was to retain close ties with Bristol, taking a wife from there (Juryan Dawes<sup>1</sup>), his main interests were to be in Pembrokeshire. Whether he kept contact with Cabot is not known, but, in the winter of 1540-41, he wrote up 'A brief summe of geographie' for Henry VIII, and he is likely himself to have been the 'pilot from Seville well versed in the affairs of the sea' whom Henry VIII did not in the end agree to send on a northern voyage. Though Barlow gave an account of Brazil and the Plate based on his own experiences there in 1526-8, he did not mention Cabot by name, but assumes that the king already knows the story. This might suggest that he had already made some report to the king, which has now

1. The Bristol Audit Book, 1532-3, p. 50, has the following entry: 20th August 1533. Roger Barlow, merchaunnt is admitted in to the liberties by cause he hath married with Julian the daughter of Mr. Robert Dawys and hath paid his fee 3/4.  
I am indebted for this reference to Miss Elizabeth Ralph.

been lost, of Cabot's South American voyage soon after his return to England.

Cabot did not have altogether an easy time in Spain after his return. To litigation by his former companions on the American voyage, was added rivalry with Alonso Chaves, who had done most of his work as pilot-major, 1526-32, and who was an uneasy collaborator, especially after 1536 when he got the post of royal cosmographer. They did not, despite Charles V's orders, work effectively together on the revision of the *padrón real*: there were recriminations about Cabot's standards in chart-making and, though he was upheld in an inquiry in 1545, his position was becoming less comfortable. He had, as early as 1538, canvassed the idea of coming to England to see the king and possibly returning to his service. Had the northern expedition, discussed in 1540-41, been proceeded with he might have been granted his wish—and he may even have been consulted. He was getting old—by 1545 he was over sixty—and was in recurrent financial difficulties, the precise cause of which is unknown. As it was, Henry VIII was dead and Edward VI was on the throne before positive inducements were made to him to come to England. When they were he responded rapidly and favourably.<sup>1</sup>

The death of Cabot's second wife, Catalina de Medrano, in 1547—his first wife had died long before—lessened his ties with Spain still further, though he had sufficient property remaining in Seville to remain somewhat apprehensive about its fate if he left Spain. In October 1547 the English privy council made money available to bring him to England, though perhaps only for a visit, and he got leave to travel to the Netherlands, i.e. within Charles V's dominions. While his salary was paid in Spain up to November 1548, it is probable that he was, by then, in England and that he intended, though with occasional hesitations, to stay there. He had been conveyed to England by Henry Ostriche, a relative of William Ostriche, a prominent member of the Andalusia Company settled in San Lucar, who had had close trading relations with Bristol.<sup>2</sup> Henry is said, in 1586, to have been Cabot's son-in-law and so may

1. Much of the material on Cabot in England, 1548-57, is in Harris (1882 and 1896), Medina, II (1908), and is supplemented by documents in *Cal. state papers Spain, 1547-58*, 5 vols. (1913-54) and *Cal. patent rolls, Philip and Mary*, 4 vols. (1937-9).

2. The Juan Estar (John Ostriche ?), with whom Cabot had business dealings in Spain, in company with Roger Bodenham, is likely to have been a member of the same family (Medina, I (1908), 527-8).



have married his Bristol-born daughter, Elizabeth.<sup>1</sup> Sebastian Cabot was to reside for the last decade of his life in England, and it seems clear that he spent the first months after his return at Bristol, which he may not have visited since before he had left for Spain in 1512 apart from a possible brief visit in 1521. He was residing there, for example, in May 1549. Whom he can have known there by this time is hard to say and there are few surviving Bristol records for the period which can help us. John Barlow, Roger's brother, was a prebendary of Bristol cathedral and is likely to have spent some time in the city, while Roger, although his interests were by then mainly in Pembrokeshire, had not broken off connections with Bristol. The Barlows are at least probable contacts, but we cannot say whether Sebastian had any property or relatives left in the city. He did not settle down permanently in Bristol, however, and, after he was called to London in May 1549, we do not know that he returned to live there, though he may have paid brief visits and is likely to have remained in touch with his friends. But it is perhaps significant that we can trace no Bristol investment in the major enterprises with which he was concerned—unless a possible contact with a Barbary voyage—and that Bristol, in particular, played no part in the northerly passage ventures with which Sebastian's English career reaches a late climax.

Somerset, Paget, Northumberland—such great men were his contacts in the government, 1549-53, and London magnates, like Sir George Barne, Sir John York, William Garrard and Francis Lambert, his associates amongst the merchant class. James Alday, a seaman, was in Cabot's service in 1550, when he was stopped by royal letters, at Cabot's instance he claimed, from going on a Mediterranean voyage as master on Captain Roger Bodenham's ship, himself an old contact of Cabot's in Spain. Richard Shelley, possibly a relative of the John Acheley or Ashley involved in the Guinea trade in the fifteen-sixties, accompanied Cabot once on a visit to the imperial ambassador and may have been his secretary who is referred to on another, similar, occasion. We have no other information on his personal contacts, apart from a brief association with the French Huguenot pilot, Jacques Ribault, who was to die in Florida at the hands of the Spaniards in 1565.

It is in connection with Ribault that we get the first glimpse of Sebastian Cabot in 1550, engaged in discussions on a northerly

1. Taylor (1932), p. xxiii.

venture. Edward VI was said by the imperial representative to wish to send two of his ships to the East. Cabot was being retained for this purpose and Jean Ribault had been released from prison in connection with it: 'Some say, moreover, that the king intended to send a few ships towards Ireland [=Iceland] by the northern route to discover some island which is said to be rich in gold', and this odd rumour is said to have been current for some six months, that is it went back to the latter months of 1549. This sounds like a plan for a Thorne-type voyage over the Pole, with a little colour—gold-colour—thrown in. Nearly six months later, at the opening of 1551, we have a similar report. Jacques Ribault was engaged in drawing up a marine chart, and Sebastian Cabot was working with him on it; they were to have a commission, or at least Ribault with some Englishmen experienced in navigation who had been with Cabot (Barlow, perhaps, one of them), 'to discover some islands, taking the way of the Arctic Pole'; two ships indeed are said to have been almost ready. This was more certainly a Thorne-style project, if the reports of it were not a blind for an ambitious venture they were concocting with Warwick and the French ambassador, Boisdauphin, for a joint Anglo-French expedition up the Amazon to take Peru in the rear, which Sebastian Cabot revealed to the imperial ambassador in 1553 when it had long been a thing of the past. But Ribault soon found other employment and Cabot took some little time to return to his northern pre-occupations.

Cabot was strongly concerned with his own property rights. On 4 June 1550 he obtained an exemplification of the royal grant of 5 April 1496 to his father, himself and his brothers, the original of which had, he said, been lost, though we do not know what use he made of it except that he may have employed it to get a reward of £200 from the crown soon after. He then, in 1551, began to worry about the property which his long-dead mother, Mattea, might have left in Venice and which had never been claimed. The signory, after representations by the English ambassador, committed the matter to the secretary, Giovanni Battista Ramusio, who had already recorded Sebastian's earlier career in his *Viaggi*,<sup>1</sup> but there were few documents extant and nothing could be traced. Cabot also kept a door ajar for his return to the emperor's service. From 1549 to 1554 frequent attempts were made to induce him

1. A rather confused account had appeared in *Viaggi*, I (1550), ff. 398-403; it was corrected by a letter from Cabot (possibly as a result of this assignment) in III (1556), ff. 4,417.

to return to Spain or to visit the emperor. Cabot often visited successive imperial ambassadors, from time to time letting fall some information on his activities or bringing some titbit of intelligence with him. He frequently expressed the desire to leave England and offered to bring the emperor information on navigation and other topics which he considered to be of great value. He was certainly concerned about his Seville property which might, he feared, be confiscated, and it is said of him, correctly, by one ambassador in 1550 that he 'tried to make his profit out of both sides'. As late as November 1553 he sent the emperor a world map by the hands of a Spanish friend of his, Francisco de Orista, offering to come and demonstrate his theories—held it may be said for a long time before this—on the linkage of magnetic variation with longitude and a consequent method of determining the latter. But always when he was invited over he found a powerful English official who put obstacles in the way of his going, or he was ill, or he was too old and feeble. He may have gained a little by playing off his imperial ties against his English employers but there is no evidence that he seriously intended to go again to the continent. Yet his conduct throws some light on his personality as an old man. He cast round him an air of authority and of mystery: he acted as if he was the repository of many secrets and, if sometimes he seemed a little silly in nursing mysteries, he did impress himself seriously on the London business community, which was by no means credulous, but which had taken a beating in the commercial field with the collapse of the cloth trade in 1550 and which was consequently open to suggestions for new lines of trade such as Cabot could make to them with a unique authority.

The imperial representative in London in 1553 said that Cabot had been employed 'on several occasions upon the equipping of certain vessels for the discovering of new land'. He may indeed have had an investment in the *Bark Aucher* for Roger Bodenham's Levant voyage of 1551, in which Richard Chancellor served part of his sea apprenticeship, but this, like the voyages to Barbary and Guinea from 1551 onwards, were to areas not yet systematically frequented by English merchants rather than to 'new lands'. James Alday, Cabot's servant, claimed that he 'invented' the voyage 'for the trade of Barbary' which he set on foot—perhaps with Cabot's backing—in 1551. His ship's company was struck down by disease and Alday and Henry Ostriche, Cabot's son-in-law, were amongst those affected, Ostriche fatally, so that it was

1. R. Hakluyt, *Principal navigations* V, 71-6, VI (1904). 136-7.

Thomas Wyndham who took the *Lion* profitably to Barbary in 1551. The backing of the major London merchants, Barne, York, Garrard and Lambert, for the 1553 venture, when their association with Cabot on another venture was already established, makes it almost certain that Sebastian was one of the principal entrepreneurs in this series of voyages. The extension of the trade from Barbary to Guinea in the third voyage of the series, in 1553, may have taken place under Cabot's influence since his correspondence with Charles V shows him to have been particularly interested in this area. Thomas Wyndham, who commanded the English ships on all three occasions, had a house at Marshwood Park, near Minehead, so that he may well have had associates in common with Cabot at Bristol. We might suspect that there was a Bristol group interested in the 1552 voyage at least, though firm evidence for this is lacking. Wyndham, however, brought the *Lion* round from London to the Kingroad in 1552, acquiring there an additional vessel, a Portuguese ship brought in as a prize to Newport and valuable as possible cover from Portuguese patrols on the African coast. She was fitted out at Bristol and the expedition sailed from there, the Bristol men noting that the *Lion* was 'laden with merchandise, so and in like manner with munitions, as Morris pikes in great number, with hand guns, shirts of mail, with other artillery meet for the war.'<sup>1</sup> Wyndham was prepared to fight the Portuguese if necessary, but part of his warlike lading at least was for trade in Morocco itself. Cabot's link with the 1553 Guinea voyage is referred to specifically by Simon Renard, Charles V's ambassador, when he wrote of its being directed to Guinea 'on Cabot's advice', perhaps with sardonic overtones, as he was stressing its ill success, Wyndham and many of his men having perished on it.

Sebastian Cabot had a considerable reputation during his lifetime as a cartographer, but only a few traces of his work survive. The most important are in the printed world map of 1544, surviving only a copy in the Bibliothèque Nationale.<sup>2</sup> He had signed in 1541 a contract with two Seville printers, Lazaro Noremberger and Gabriel Miçel, to produce a world map for them to publish. It would appear that Cabot failed to get the emperor's approval for this scheme and so dared not use for it the *padrón real*, the secret

1. Bristol Archives Department, B.A.O. 00005 (3), text modernised.
2. On the 1544 map, R. A. Skelton in Williamson (1962), pp. 322-4 and *Dictionary of Canadian biography*, I (1965), 157-159, is authoritative: a copy of the Latin version of the legends, printed as a pamphlet, is in the Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

master chart which was under his control as pilot major. Accordingly, a French world map was used as a base for the 1544 map and Cabot's contributions to it were confined to notes on his own and his father's voyages and of his views on navigation. After Cabot came to England a new version of this map was produced by Clement Adams in 1549 and to this Cabot made some additions, particularly in his claim to have reached on his northern voyage a channel between 61° and 64° N. which extended westwards for at least ten degrees of longitude. This formed excellent publicity for his views since the map was bought and displayed by many merchants and courtiers, though no copy has survived. Cabot is not known to have received further publicity in print before 1553 when Richard Eden referred to his voyages in *A treatyse of the newe India* (1553)—and was later to give further references to him in *The decades of the newe worlde or west India* (1555)—but though Eden met Cabot he gained his published information on him mainly from Ramusio and Peter Martyr. Clement Adams, who wrote up the 1553 voyage (*Noua Anglorum ad Moscouitas nauigatio* (1554)),<sup>1</sup> tells how 'certain grave citizens of London, and men of great wisdom, and careful of the good of their country . . . began first of all to deal and consult diligently with him', Sebastian Cabot, who is described as 'a man in those days very renowned'. His growing reputation is attested also by the imperial ambassador who wrote of him on 4 September 1553—'the people of London set a great value on the captain's services, and believe him to be possessed of secrets concerning English navigation'.

Cabot's greatest secret was his claim to know the routes through northern waters to Cathay, and the planning of expeditions to the north took place under some cover of secrecy between 1549 and 1553, emerging in the latter year with news that ships were at last ready to sail. As late as March 1553 a report to Charles V still confused the preparations for the Guinea and northern voyages, though they may well have overlapped. By April 10 clear information was available about three ships which had sailed down the Thames for the north: 'they will follow a northerly course', it was reported, 'and navigate by the Frozen Sea towards the great Cham-china,<sup>2</sup> or the neighbouring counties . . . and they believe the route

1. Hakluyt, *Principall navigations* (1589), p. 280; *Principal navigations*, II (1903), 239-40.

2. Marco Polo's version would have been translated as 'Great Khan of Cathay': 'cham' came into English in 1553 and 'China' in 1555 through Richard Eden (E. Arber, ed, *The first three English books on America* (1885), pp. 12, 260), but he did not join them into a single word.



to be a short one, and very convenient for the kingdom of England, for distributing kerseys in these far countries, bringing back spices and other rich merchandise in exchange'. 'Captain Cabot' had come to see the imperial ambassador, Jean Scheyfve, and, finding him already well informed about the venture, submitted to being interviewed on its prospects. Was it as certain as it seemed? 'Yes it was', said Cabot. When it was suggested that 'Chamchina' formed part of the Spanish overseas zone, 'he said it was true; but that view only interested the Emperor and the King of Portugal, while the others would probably claim that the land would belong to him who first occupied it'. This statement of the English view of effective occupation might suggest that the sponsors of the voyage envisaged imperial conquests as well as trade in the Far East. But Cabot was evidently unwilling to be too specific about routes since Scheyfve on May 11 was still uncertain whether the vessels were going to the North-west, North-east or over the Pole: 'some said that they would steer to the north-east and pass the Frozen Sea, and others that their plan was to follow a westerly course and enter the Strait of the Three Brethern [illustrated by Gemma Frisius, in the North-west], or pass Cape de Las Parras [possibly Barra Head, Hebrides], on the way to the Pole. We do not know under what circumstances the most novel of the three routes, that to the North-east, was eventually chosen.'

The combination of several hundred London merchants in 'the mystery and company of the Merchant Adventurers of the city of London . . . for the discovery of Cathay, and divers other regions, dominions, islands, and places unknown', to give it the nearest approximation to its earliest title, was a spectacular affair, at the head of which Sebastian Cabot emerged as governor.<sup>2</sup> On 9 February 1553, at Ratcliffe, Cabot delivered to the expedition, which was about to sail down river under its commander Sir Hugh Willoughby, a set of ordinances for the conduct of the voyage. They included many sensible provisions for discipline, consultation and conduct during the voyage with much detail on how its progress was to be recorded so that subsequent expeditions could retrace its course. Many of the precepts are likely to have sprung from Cabot's own experience but collectively they were the work of the syndicate's executive, governor, consuls and assistants.

The ships made their way slowly out of the Thames and up the

1. The Hakluyt references are *Principal navigations* (1589, pp. 259-63, 311; *Principal navigations*, II (1904), pp. 212, 195-205, 240, 281.
2. HARRISSE (1896), pp. 458-60, 372.

east coast, taking off from Orford Ness for Norway only on June 23 and thence making their way to the open sea north of Norway and ultimately to the White Sea and Muscovy, thus opening a new English trade not with Cathay but, more prosaically, with Russia. Sebastian Cabot's place in the company's development after Richard Chancellor's return in 1554 with news of his achievements in Russia may have been little more than nominal. No royal charter had been issued to the syndicate before Edward VI died and when Queen Mary finally incorporated the company on 26 February 1555 its title was still couched in the most general terms as the 'merchants adventurers of England for the discovery of lands . . . unknown, and not commonly frequented', which might cover ventures to almost any place outside western Europe. Sebastian Cabot was honoured by being made governor for life as he had been 'the chief setter forth of the journey or voyage'. On 1 May 1555 he presided over a court meeting of the company, his last known appearance in this capacity, though the 'good old Gentleman' gave a lively farewell to Stephen Borough's Muscovy expedition on 27 April 1556.

A life pension of 200 marks (£133 13s. 4d.) a year for life granted on 27 November 1555 was his final reward. He may not have enjoyed it entirely peacefully since a friend of Cabot's, Thomas Tyrell of Birdbrook, Essex, making his will in 1556, left a bequest to Sir William Petre, the secretary of state,<sup>1</sup> 'trusting that he will be good Master to Master Captain Caybote whensoever he shall have occasion to sue for his pension'. On 29 May 1557 the pension was reassigned to be held jointly with William Worthington, and Cabot continued to draw his half share of it until Michaelmas 1557, presumably dying between September 29 and December 25 in that year, since the next payment, of the full amount, was made to Worthington alone. Worthington, who enjoyed his pension for many years, acted, apparently, as Cabot's executor and retained in his possession in 1582, according to Richard Hakluyt, 'all his own maps and discourses drawn and written by himself' which the great editor hoped to publish. A partial reversion of the pension to Mary Scudamore in 1584<sup>2</sup> indicated that it was not thought Worthington had long to live, but he died without leaving any trace of Cabot's maps and papers, in the absence of which so many queries about his life and opinions remain unanswered.

1. Essex County Record Office, T/A 256/8, for information on which I am indebted to Mr. F. G. Emmison.
2. BAO 5139 (406).

Bristol had, largely through John Cabot and his son Sebastian, a distinguished association with the overseas voyages of the great period of European expansion. This began about 1480 and was dominated by John Cabot between about 1494 and his death in 1498. Sebastian Cabot, who regarded himself very much as a Bristol man, continued this association until 1521. Thereafter it was peripheral and discontinuous, though the link survived until 1549 at least and possibly until 1553. The city was thus one of the commercial centres outside Italy where the new Italian entrepreneur, who played such a vital part in the overseas movement, settled and from which he operated.<sup>1</sup> John Cabot, with some aid in a minor capacity from the boy Sebastian, we may legitimately assume, undertook three voyages into the Atlantic from Bristol, only one of them, that of 1497, successfully, but that sufficiently so to put the Bristol discoveries in the European picture and to give England a place on the maps and narratives of the slowly-revealed New World. Sebastian remained aware that the 1497 voyage was a significant achievement and sometimes appeared to take credit for it himself. His own north-west voyage was for so long wrapped in obscurity, partly due to himself, that it remained difficult to be sure when it was made. It continued most persistently to be associated with John rather than Sebastian and with 1498 rather than with 1508-9. But in so far as it could be seen as an achievement distinct from that of 1497, it appeared in his own time, and must still appear to us, as an important step in defining the eastern coastline of North America and in establishing its continental character as well as being the starting point for a whole series of wild goose chases in search of a North-west Passage to Asia, which, though it led to a great waste of resources over more than two centuries, was a vital stage in the modern exploration of the Arctic. Unfortunately, Bristol did not have sufficient confidence in Sebastian Cabot, or he in her merchants, for them to build on the pioneer Cabotian achievements. His knowledge went instead to strengthen and develop the Spanish American empire, and his solid achievement lay in the building up of pilotage into an essential instrument in the running of a maritime empire. Cabot, after his return to England, revived his connection with Bristol, but had to turn to London and its greater mercantile resources and initiative to get effective backing for his plans. In so far as these helped English commerce to break out of its traditional mould and

1. C. Verlinden, *Les origines de la civilisation atlantique* (1966), p. 160.

led to the diversification of English enterprise in the Mediterranean, Africa and Russia, he is an important figure in economic and maritime history. But he is an ironic figure too. His great vanity was that he had discovered a means of determining longitude, but this was a complete illusion. His great secret apart from this was his knowledge of passages from England to the Far East by the North, North-west and North-east, but these were illusions also. His effective achievements were by-products only of his more visionary projects. It is not easy, given the surviving evidence, to estimate his character clearly. A man of many talents, competent and far seeing in many respects, he was also vain, and in action arbitrary, while he lived a fantasy life of mysteries and dark secrets alongside his more prosaic every day activities. Did he imitate Columbus in much of this or was it derived from the mould in which businessmen-mystics of the Italian dispersion were cast?

## Sebastion Cabot, 1968–1992

Much has come to light since the pamphlet was published. It appears that John Cabot did survive the 1498 voyage, though the evidence for it has not yet been published. If he did (and we have noted above that several men who were expected to go on the voyage in fact survived) then it is almost certain that Sebastian (aged perhaps 14 or 15) did go with his father and returned. But what he was doing between 1498 and 1502 is still unknown. What we may now say, thanks to the researches of Dr Alwyn Ruddock, is that he was probably an important associate in the syndicate that operated actively from Bristol from 1502 to 1505. This first explored much more than the east coast of Newfoundland, probably some part of the Labrador coast. It was apparently led there by two of the Azores Portuguese from Terceira in the Azores who had come to Bristol in 1501 and teamed with some Bristol merchants to make an independent voyage, but who after their leader, João Fernandes, disappeared, apparently on the 1501 voyage, had then joined Robert Thorne and his brothers and Hugh Elyot in the group which organised the crucial voyages of 1502–1505. These led to the exploration of the North American mainland, not only the coast of Labrador but at least as far south as New England. Moreover, since John Cabot in 1497 had brought news of the numbers of cod to be found off Newfoundland, they were able to start the Newfoundland fishery in 1502 and continue it at least in 1504 – thus showing that the English were the pioneers in what was soon to become a great international business. Sebastian Cabot was probably not formally a principal in the syndicate until he had reached his majority by April 1505, so he could then receive a royal reward of a pension in that month for what he had done before that time. By far the greater part of this new information comes from Dr Ruddock's paper in the *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* (1974), xlii, 95–9, which is well worth reprinting in full (with permission), omitting only a document at the end. Dr Ruddock's paper reads as follows:

### *The Reputation of Sebastian Cabot*

THE CONTRIBUTION of Sebastian Cabot to the discovery of North America and his voyage of exploration to Arctic regions in the reign of Henry VII in search of a passage to Cathay have long been a subject of debate among historians. Nineteenth-century writers eulogized Sebastian as the discoverer of North America until the publication of documents from the archives of Venice and Milan drew attention to his father's leading role



in the voyages of 1498 and 1498. An extensive search in English archives failed to produce a shred of evidence of any voyage led by Sebastian. His stock sank very low in consequence. Henry Harrisse, in particular, conceived an almost paranoiac hatred of the Venetian, lambasting him as an unfilial son who stole his father's glory – a cheat, a liar and a charlatan.<sup>2</sup> The rehabilitation of Sebastian Cabot was begun by one of his own countrymen, Carlo Errera, then a young scholar at the beginning of his career. Following the publication of an extract from a *relazione* in the Venetian Senate in 1536 by Marcantonio Contarini, the Venetian ambassador to Spain, Errera showed the voyage discussed by Sebastian with the ambassador must have been made in 1508–9, long after the death of his father.<sup>3</sup> Since then, Sebastian has generally been credited with an expedition to high latitudes in 1508–9, during which voyage, according to a statement he made in his old age to Richard Eden, he was compelled to turn back through the faint heart and cowardice of Thomas Spert.

Nevertheless, there are still grave doubts about the truth of Sebastian's claims. Charters for exploration and grants of pensions for discoveries made by the members of an Anglo-Portuguese syndicate in Bristol in the first decade of the sixteenth century have emerged from English archives, but no such charter or reward for Sebastian has hitherto been found – merely the grant of an annuity of £10, dated 3 April 1505, for services to the king about the port of Bristol.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the accounts of his voyage as related by Peter Martyr, Giovan Battista Ramusio and Gaspare and Marcantonio Contarini contain discrepancies and contradictions it seems impossible to reconcile. Finally, from Seville comes the perplexing claim of Robert Thorne the younger, made in a letter to the English ambassador in Spain in 1527 – 'My father . . . with an [other] Merchant of Brystow named hughe Elliot [were] the discoverers of the Newfound Landes'<sup>5</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, to find the two latest historians who have written about Sebastian Cabot's voyage still doubt the veracity of his claims.<sup>6</sup>

New documents, however, sometimes can elucidate statements in the work of sixteenth-century writers which seem contradictory and even downright absurd. This has recently been shown in the case of a much disputed passage in the *Life of the Admiral Christopher Columbus* by his son, Ferdinand, concerning the voyage Columbus is alleged to have made to Iceland.<sup>7</sup> The document printed below explains many of the apparent contradictions found in contemporary writings about Sebastian Cabot, for it shows he made two separate voyages of exploration under the English flag in the reign of Henry VII. The suspicious discrepancies in Sebastian's story largely disappear when it is evident that he was speaking to different people at different times about two entirely different voyages he had made in high latitudes in the North-West Atlantic. One took place in 1504, the other in 1508–9; each attained to a different degree of latitude; one turned back in June, the other in July; one was made in ships of Bristol merchants, the other in ships provided by the king.

The records of the exchequer contain a number of hitherto unpublished documents relating to the earliest English voyages to America. It was an unlucky day for Sebastian Cabot when Professor Newton made his dip into the memoranda rolls, for the writ he published in 1922 was a defective copy which made Sebastian's annuity appear to be a reward for services to the

king at Bristol. In fact, the annuity grant was Sebastian's reward for the discovery of new lands.

The document that has obscured the achievements of Sebastian Cabot for so many years is a copy of a writ of privy seal dated 3 April 20 Henry VII and entered on the memoranda roll of the King's Remembrancer of the exchequer among the *brevia directa baronibus*. Addressed to the treasurer and barons of the exchequer, it authorizes them to make allowance for the payment of Sebastian's annuity from the royal customs receipts at Bristol each time the customs officials came to the exchequer for the annual audits. It was quite usual to enter a copy of such writs on the rolls for future reference. But in the transit of the writ from the king's secretary through the privy seal office to the exchequer and the final entry on the memoranda roll someone left out a vital phrase in copying. This is quite clear when it is compared with the first document printed below, which is a transcript of a writ to the customs officials of Bristol, produced at the audit of royal customs collected at Bristol between 12 December 1504 and Michaelmas 1505 and copied on the Lord Treasurer's Remembrancer's memoranda roll. The customers claimed allowance for payment of the instalments of Sebastian's annuity falling within the period covered by this account and brought with them this privy seal writ, likewise dated 3 April 20 Henry VII, authorizing them to pay Sebastian from the king's revenues at Bristol. A copy of this writ and also Sebastian's receipt for his first two half-yearly payments were included in the lengthy record of the audit and they are printed below, modern editorial practice having been followed in punctuation, capitalization and extensions [now omitted].

The copy of the writ of privy seal addressed to the Bristol customs officials contains a vital phrase not found in the copy of the writ sent to the treasurer and barons authorizing payment of the annuity. It declares this grant was made 'in consideration of the diligent servuce and attendaunce that oure welbeloued Sebastian Caboot, Venician, hath doon vnto vs in and aboute the fyndynge of the newe founde landes to oure full good pleasur and for that he shall doo hereafter in and aboute the same'. It is easy to see how the slip was made in view of the repetition of the words 'in and aboute' both at the beginning and again at the end of the missing phrase. A search in the chancery and exchequer records has failed to find earlier versions of the writ to the treasurer and barons, so it is not possible to ascertain at what stage of transmission the phrase was left out. There are several copies of the writ to the Bristol customers on the memoranda roll and the enrolled customs accounts for Bristol for the period 12 December 1504 to Michaelmas 1505 also show the annuity paid 'pro bono et gratuito servicio quod prefatus Sebastianus eidem domino regi circa invencionem nove terre impendit ad bonum placitum ipsius domini regis'.<sup>9</sup> The reason for the royal grant was well known in Bristol and also at the exchequer. The suggestion that Sebastian must have gone on more than one voyage of discovery, made by G.P. Winship, is at last proved true. Before 3 April 1505 the young Venetian had made a notable voyage of exploration to the Newfoundland.

The memoranda rolls tell more about this expedition, which took place in 1504. Two ships set out from Bristol, the *Jesus* and the *Gabriel*, skippered by Richard Savery and Philip Ketyner and fitted out by Robert Thorne and Hugh Elyot, two merchants in partnership at Bristol for more than twenty

years.<sup>10</sup> The owners of the *Jesus* are not known but the *Gabriel*, a ship of about 120 tons burden, was bought in Dieppe in 1501 by Robert and William Thorne and Hugh Elyot of Bristol with the assistance of a bounty of £20 given them by Henry VII.<sup>11</sup> She had already made one previous voyage to *Terra Nova* in 1502, skippered by John A Mayne, a kinsman to the Thorne family.<sup>12</sup> The two ships must have left Bristol in the spring of 1504 with Sebastian aboard. There is no record of their departure in the particulars of customs for Bristol covering Michaelmas 1503–4, but the enrolled customs for the following months record their return between Michaelmas and 12 December 1504, bringing with them 20 lasts of salted fish and 7 tons 1 pipe fish livers from the 'Newe Found Iland'.<sup>13</sup> The claim of Thorne and Elyot to bring in this cargo, valued at £207 10s. by the Bristol customers, not only free of customs duties (which were not levied on fish taken in the sea) but also of the subsidy of 12d. in the pound value payable on salted fish, amounting to £10 7s. 6d., further supports my argument against the theory of fishing voyages postulated from Bristol to the Newfoundland Banks in the last two decades of the fifteenth century.<sup>14</sup> If such voyages had taken place before John Cabot's discovery in 1497 we might have expected to find either some record of payment or a claim for exemption from payment of this subsidy on salt fish much earlier than 1502 and 1504.

Sebastian Cabot may have been a part-owner of the *Jesus* in 1504 but Thorne and Elyot were the promoters of the expedition and the masters of both ships are also named in the exchequer process. Sebastian must, therefore, have sailed as chief navigator in charge of charting and exploration during the voyage, as the wording of his grant implies. His knowledge of cosmography and of chartmaking as practised in the Italian seaports, learned from John Cabot, who made both globes and charts, must have made him an invaluable member of the expedition, for such knowledge was very rare in English ports in the reign of Henry VII. Lack of space precludes any further consideration of this voyage and also of his disastrous voyage of 1508–9 but both are discussed in detail in my forthcoming book, *Columbus, Cabot and the English Discovery of America*.<sup>15</sup>

Alwyn A. Ruddock

The detail now available shows that the 'Company of Adventurers into the New Found Islands' (the syndicate which operated from 1502 to, probably, 1506) failed financially by 1506. Certainly there is no record of a fur trade being established, though hawks, an eagle, wild cats (lynx), paroquets and some specimens of bows and arrows from native Americans were presented to the king at various times, and, most remarkable of all, three men who were brought to Court in 1502 and were still there (though by now dressed in European clothes) several years later.<sup>16</sup> It seems most unlikely that they were Eskimo (Inuit), as their strange appearance would surely have been remarked on. They could have been Beothuk from Newfoundland, but these were simple, elusive

people, rarely seen by Europeans. They are lest unlikely to have been Micmac from the Maritimes, who were relatively sophisticated in their own culture and were capable, as later events were to show, of rapidly taking on some European characteristics – though this must remain conjectural. The expenses of exploration without adequate return appear to have outbalanced the profits from the fishery and seem most likely to have brought about the failure of the syndicate.

Sebastian Cabot was thus left in 1506 with nothing but his pension of £10 a year and his ambition, which we can surely assume was already evident, so what did he now do? Well before Waldseemüller posited the existence of western continents that were not Asia (Columbus died in 1506 still holding to his theory that what he had found was Asiatic), the Bristol men knew that a northern continent lay across the ocean some 2000 miles west of Ireland, while the Portuguese seem to have had an idea that it might be possible to sail round this landmass by some channel or other and so reach Asia by that means. Though we cannot read Sebastian Cabot's mind, this notion might appear to have been in it by 1506 and led on to his expedition of 1508–1509. Though no new evidence about the expedition itself has so far been published, an insoluble puzzle has emerged about his whereabouts between 1506 and 1508, since he did not collect his pension after 1506, until he appealed to exchequer officials on 7 May 1509 to request that instalments due in March and September 1507 and March 1508 be paid to him, and this was agreed, as was apparently the regular payment later on of the instalment of September 1508.<sup>17</sup> His appearance in May 1509 confirms suggestions already made that he had by that time completed his transatlantic voyage and returned to Bristol. But the surprising discovery made by Miss Margaret Condon of the Public Record Office on the Pipe Roll of 2 Henry VIII is that his pension from March 1506 and September 1508 had been cancelled and he was required to repay the £25 received (he had, according to a note on the roll paid £24 16s 8d by some time in 1512) raises so far insoluble questions. These documents certainly indicate that he was out of England between March 1506 and September 1508, perhaps longer at either end, and so was not in the service of the late King Henry VII. Where can he have been and for what purpose, besides making his voyage up the Labrador coast, wintering some place on North American shores and returning to England in the late spring of 1509? The puzzle may well be in his acquisition of ships and equipment to make the voyage. He, himself in one place, alleges

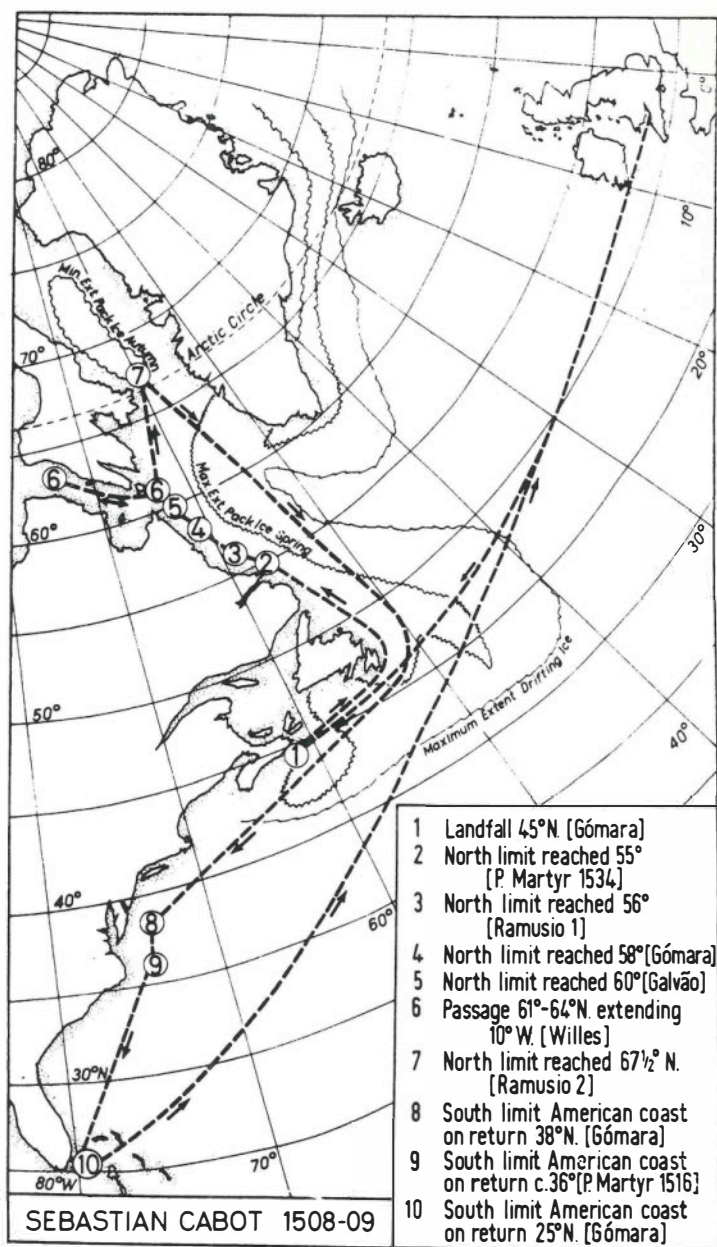
that he provided the ships out of his own resources (his claim to have had 300 men on board them can be dismissed as wildly improbable), and in another place that the ships and equipment were given to him by King Henry VII. The absence of any such payment in the well-researched financial records of Henry VII's reign, his known caution in expending any large sums on any of the Bristol voyages, especially after the failure of the exploring and fishing syndicate in 1506, makes it highly unlikely that he did so, while the new information makes it reasonably certain that he got his resources elsewhere. The only suggestion that can be made is that he somehow borrowed the money outside England. Since Antwerp was the banking capital of northern Europe it might appear to be the most likely source of loans. It seems unlikely that he would have obtained money on the strength of a belief that he could get to Asia by circumventing what was still generally believed to be some outshot of Asia rather than a new continent – certainly John Cabot in 1497 believed so. But he had two possible cards to play. One was that he had already sailed so far up this mainland shore as to convince himself that it was a new continent (after all the Waldseemüller circle in Strassburg and nearby in Lorraine was coming to, and may have already reached, that conclusion, so that rumours of this could have come to Antwerp). The other card he could play was that his father had not claimed the land he found in 1498 exclusively for England. He stated in one place he had planted there the banner of Venice,<sup>19</sup> of which the Cabots were citizens, and in another place the banner of the Papacy, which would suggest that assistance to Sebastian would not necessarily be regarded as an infringement of King Henry's sovereign rights of conquest by discovery. Yet the provision of two ships, however small, with supplies for at least a year, and trade goods as well, involved a substantial investment. How it was achieved must remain a mystery, but it strongly indicates that the first Northwest Passage venture was not an English-financed venture, even though Sebastian may have alleged to the new king, Henry VIII, when he returned to Bristol that it had indeed been so, but that he was somehow found to have lied and paid the price. He was not wholly discarded since he was paid in 1511 for making a map of Guienne in France for an English force that intended to fight there, but his removal to the Spanish service in 1512 was on his own initiative and shows clearly that he had no more to give or receive from England.

David B. Quinn



## NOTES

1. Notes 2 to 14 are those originally published in the article. Thanks to Dr Ruddock's discoveries, it became possible for D.B. Quinn, Alison M. and Susan Hillier to print the documents in *New American World*, 5 vols. (London and New York, 1979), i, 92-132, among the documents on the voyages of 1501-1505 (or 1506) already known and published in J.A. Williamson, *The Cabot Voyages and Bristol Discovery under Henry VII* (London, Hakluyt Society, 1962). See also D.B. Quinn, *England and the Discovery of America, 1481-1620* (New York and London, 1974), pp. 93-130, plates between pp. 194 and 195, which was published before Dr Ruddock's paper was available. In what follows Dr Ruddock's notes to her paper are reprinted as notes 2-14 below.
2. For exmple, see H. HARRISSE, 'The outcome of the Cabot quater-centenary', *American Hist. Rev.*, iv (1898), 61; HARRISSE, 'Sebastian Cabot, pilote-major de Charles-Quint', *Revue historique*, cii (1909), 1-16 and other writings by the same author.
3. C. Errera, 'I viaggi di Giovanni e di Sebastiano Caboto nell' Atlantico settentrionale', *Bollettino della società geografica italiana*, 3rd ser., vi (1893), 387-414, 751-2. Anglo-Saxon historians have always given the credit for establishing the date of Sebastian's 1508-9 voyage to G.P. Winship, but he acknowledged Errera's publication in 'Sebastian Cabot, 1508', *Geog. Jour.*, xiii (1899), 205.
4. A.P. Newton, 'An early grant to Sebastian Cabot', *Eng. Hist. Rev.*, xxvii (1922), 564-5.
5. J.A. Williamson, *The Cabot Voyages and Bristol Discovery under Henry VII* (Hakluyt Soc., 2nd ser., cxx, 1962), p. 26. In this volume Williamson prints translations of nearly all the contemporary accounts of Sebastian Cabot from continental sources.
6. S.E. Morison, *The European Discovery of America: The Northern Voyages* (New York, 1971), pp. 20 *seqq.*; D.B. Quinn, *Sebastian Cabot and Bristol Exploration* (Bristol Hist. Assoc., 1968), pp. 11-15, 29-30.
7. A.A. Ruddock, 'Columbus and Iceland: new light on an old problem', *Geog. Jour.* cxxxvi (1970), 177-89.
8. Newton, *ubi supra*, pp. 564-5.
9. Public Record Office, E 56/24, m. 2.
10. P.R.O., E368/278, *status et visus*, Trinity term, 20 Hen. VII, m. 2; C 1/406/5.
11. Williamson, pp. 247-8.
12. P.R.O., E368/276, *status et visus*, Easter term 18 Hen. VII, m. 11d.
13. P.R.O., E122/199/1; E356/24, m. 2.
14. A.A. Ruddock, 'John Day of Bristol and the English voyages across the Atlantic before 1497', *Geog. Jour.*, cxxxii (1966), 231-3.
15. Which, through various accidents, has not appeared, though omens are still good (D.B.Q.)  
Quinn, *New American World*, i, 110.
17. *Ibid.*, 121-3.
18. P.R.O., E372/256.
19. It was no doubt pleasing to Sanuto to record that Giovanni Cabot had planted the flag of San Marco in Newfoundland, 'for he is a Venetian, and thus our banner is a distance away'. Marino Sanuto, *I diarii di Marino Sanuto*, i (1879), 806-7.



Sketch-map of Sebastian Cabot's expedition in search of a North-West Passage, 1508-9.

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